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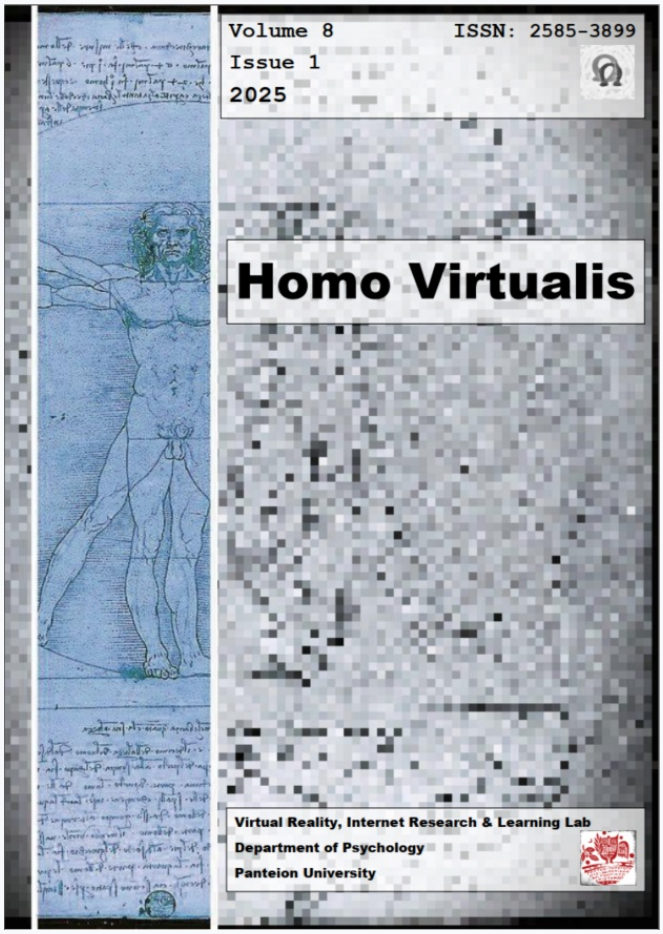

Visual methods in psychological research: Developing an open-access set of images for qualitative and reflective work

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Visual methods in psychological research: Developing an open-access set of images for qualitative and reflective work

Alexios Brailas[1]

Abstract: *Implicity* is an open-access collection of 55 Creative Commons and public domain images that can be used to facilitate reflective and imaginative engagement in psychological research, education, and related practices. Designed for their projective quality, these images, ranging from abstract compositions and artistic scenes to animals and natural landscapes, invite intuitive, non-verbal responses by activating the brain's right hemisphere. This collection can support multimodal inquiry methods where participants might select an image that resonates with them and then explore its symbolic meaning as a gateway to deeper insight. Such practices help surface unconscious or pre-verbalized aspects of experience, enriching qualitative interviewing and reflective psychoeducational activities. The technique can serve as an opening prompt or a closing ritual, blending intuitive reflection with narrative sense-making. Unlike proprietary card sets, Implicity offers a flexible, open-access alternative that can be used digitally or printed for in-person sessions. Furthermore, recent advances in interpersonal neurobiology clarify more why visual methods in psychology are effective: they align with the relational and embodied nature of the mind, activate implicit memory, and support emotion regulation through right-hemisphere engagement. Practitioners are encouraged to adapt the set to their context, adding or removing images as needed. By providing an accessible, ready-to-use resource, Implicity empowers psychologists, educators, and qualitative researchers to integrate imaginative, right-brain processes into their work, enhancing depth, creativity, and participant engagement. The collection is freely available.

Keywords: visual methods, reflective practice, qualitative interviewing, psychology, group work activities, projective tools

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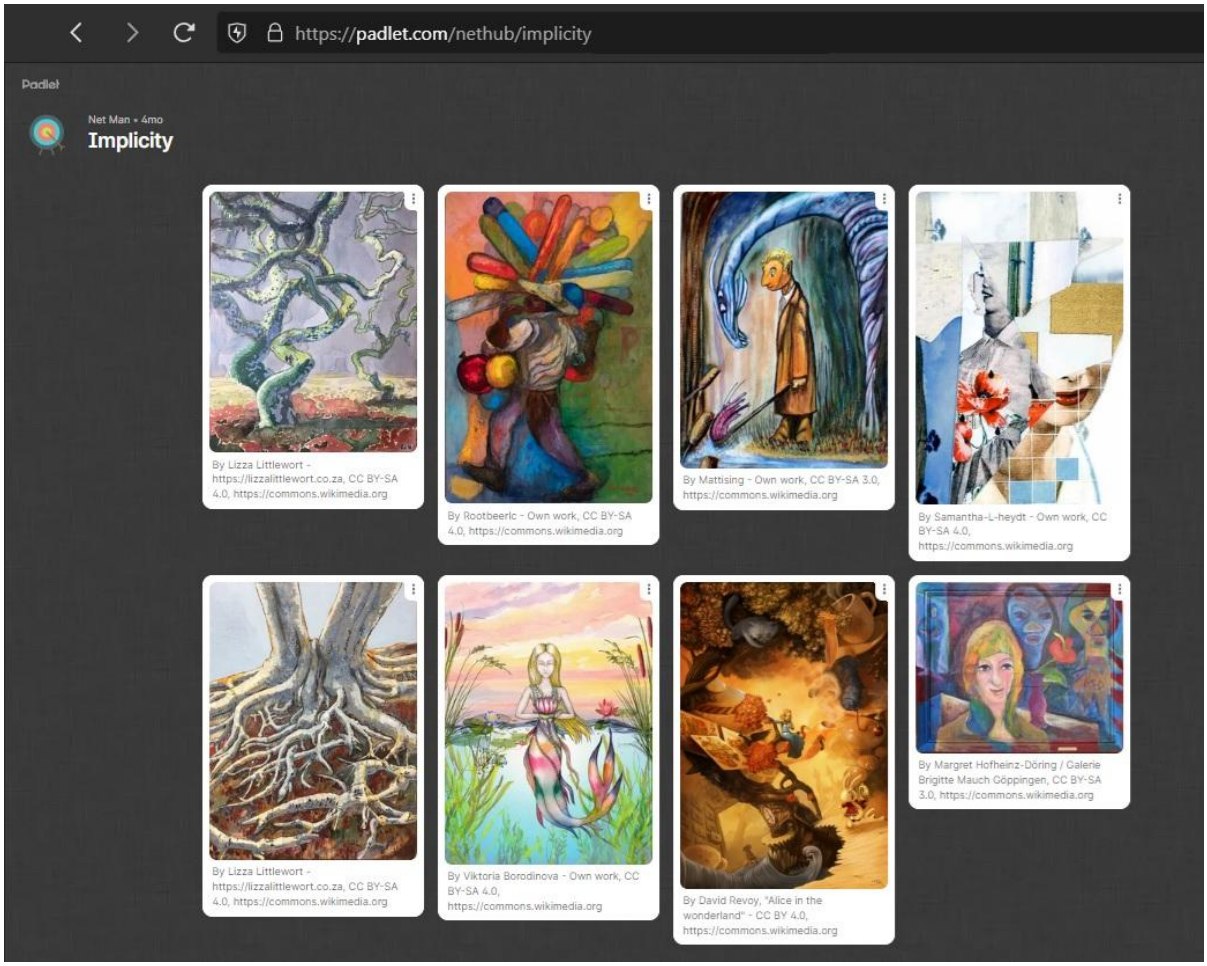
Introduction

Implicity is a curated set of 55 images, initially all under Creative Commons licenses or in the public domain, designed to support reflective activities in research, education, and related fields (Figures 1 and 2). The set is always in the becoming and following the advancements in generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) and visual technologies, new AI-generated images have been added to the collection.

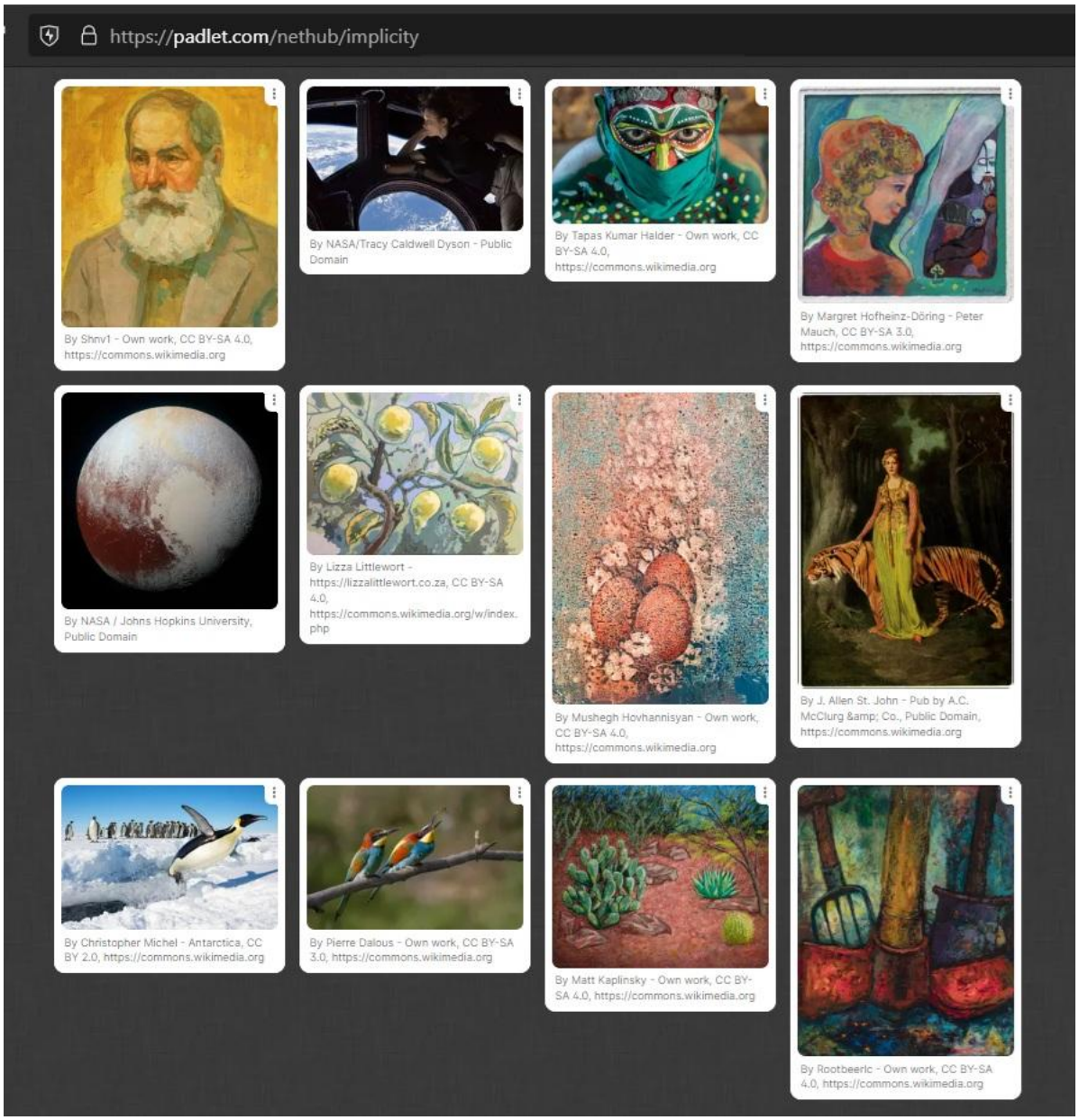
The images are intentionally chosen for their projective quality: they depict imaginary scenes, abstract figures, artistic creations, animals, and natural landscapes, inviting viewers to engage their right, analog brain hemisphere and stimulate imagination. This Implicity image set is freely available at: https://padlet.com/nethub/implicity.

Figure1: Screenshot view of the Implicity collection.



Source: https://padlet.com/nethub/implicity

Figure2: Images in the Implicity collection.



Source: https://padlet.com/nethub/implicity

Rationale and uses

These images can be used to initiate non-verbal, intuitive reflection processes. For example, in an Appreciative Inquiry qualitative research project (Brailas, 2025) exploring lived experiences or inner resources, a facilitator might invite the participant(s) during an interviewing session or a focus group discussion:

> Choose one image that resonates with you right now, for any reason you don't need to explain. Spend a moment with it. Notice how your body feels. If this image could speak, what advice might it offer you for a current challenge or transition you face?

I regularly use such images in my practice to help participants access unconscious or not-yet-verbalized aspects of themselves. In community based psychoeducational interventions, the Implicity collection can be utilized for personal reflection and then be used for initiation to pair and small-group work activities.

In qualitative interviewing, this technique can serve as an initiating activity or a closing ritual, allowing participants to leave with a sense of insight, combining right-brain understanding (Schore, 2022; Siegel, 2010) with left-brain storytelling (Brailas & Sotiropoulou, 2023; Lee, 2018).

In community-based psychoeducational interventions (Brailas & Papachristopoulos, 2023), the Implicity collection can be used for personal reflection as a way to initiate participants into pair work and small-group activities (Brailas et al., 2017). For example, we can invite participants to:

> Step 1: Choose one image that resonates with you right now, for any reason, you don't need to explain why. Spend a moment with it. Notice how your body feels. If this image could speak, what advice might it offer you for a current challenge or transition you face?
>
> Step 2: Now find another person and form pairs. Introduce yourself and connect by sharing something positive that happened to you during the past week. It can be something small, it doesn't need to be something big, just something that warmed your heart.
>
> Step 3: Share the image you picked and try to explain to your partner what you think made you choose it.
>
> Step 4: Now, while keeping your pair, join another pair to form a small group of four. In the small group, each member introduces their partner by sharing their name and some information about the image they selected. Since it is easier and safer to share more intimate things in pairs, take care not to disclose anything too personal to the small group.
>
> Step 5: Now, combine the four images and work together to write a fairy tale with a beginning, middle, and end.
>
> Step 6: Let's come back to a plenary session and share our stories.
>
> Step 7: The facilitators attempt to compile a meta-narrative, a synthesis of the small groups' stories, and share it with the whole group.

While I previously used various Dixit cards for this purpose, which are wonderful abstract illustrations suitable for this work, their proprietary nature posed some limitations. I developed the Implicity collection as a flexible, open-access alternative. It can be used digitally as it is or printed for in-person sessions. Practitioners are encouraged to adapt the set, adding or removing images as needed. A ready-to-use, easily accessible visual tool like this can support professionals working with human

systems, such as psychologists, educators, and qualitative researchers, in their practice.

To fully realize why visual tools like Implicity matter in psychological work and qualitative interviewing, it is essential to ground this practice in the science of the relational brain. The following section provides this foundation. It explains how human cognition and emotional regulation are deeply embedded in relational and embodied processes, and why non-verbal, image-based approaches can unlock dimensions of experience that words alone cannot reach. By connecting visual methods to neurobiological principles, this section clarifies the theoretical rationale behind using images as catalysts for reflection, storytelling, and interpersonal connection.

Visual methods in psychology and the relational brain

The field of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) was founded and developed by Daniel Siegel (2010, 2012), Louis Cozolino (2014), and Allan Schore (2001, 2015), among many other researchers. The core principle of IPNB is that the human mind is an embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information throughout the organism. In this way, it focuses on studying and understanding the human brain and its biology not as an isolated organ but as a dynamic, distributed system that functionally extends beyond the boundaries of the individual and is continuously shaped by interpersonal experiences and social interactions.

Siegel (2012) placed particular emphasis on neural integration through psychotherapy, the idea that psychotherapy can enhance brain function by increasing connectivity between different regions of the brain. Specifically, he introduced the term SNAG (Stimulating Neural Activation and Growth) to describe how focused attention during psychotherapy can reorganize neural connections, especially in individuals with attachment difficulties.

> Scientists have had to expand their thinking to grasp the idea that individual neurons or single human brains do not exist in nature. Without mutually stimulating interactions, people and neurons wither and die. In neurons this process is called apoptosis; in humans it is called depression, grief, and suicide. From birth until death, each of us needs others who seek us out, show interest in discovering who we are, and help us feel safe. Thus, understanding the brain requires knowledge of the healthy, living brain embedded within a community of other brains: Relationships are our natural habitat. (Cozolino, 2014, p. 13)

Allan Schore (2001, 2015, 2022) studied how early attachment experiences shape the neurobiological substrate of emotion regulation. The right hemisphere, which dominates in the early years of life, is responsible for processing emotions, bodily awareness, and holistic perception of experiences. Schore demonstrated that secure early attachments strengthen adaptive affect regulation. Conversely, early relational

trauma can lead to dysregulated emotional states. Through psychotherapy, these dysfunctional patterns can be reorganized, allowing for more functional emotional responses in the present. At the level of psychotherapeutic practice, he emphasized the need for connection and communication between the right hemispheres of therapist and client as a key mechanism for changing underlying neurobiological processes related to emotion regulation. This interaction can facilitate the reorganization of neural circuits and provide a reparative experience, supporting more secure attachment patterns and bonding styles in adult life.

An important finding in Schore's research is the significance of implicit memory, experiences stored before the maturation of the hippocampus, roughly from the third trimester of pregnancy to the first 12–18 months of life. Implicit memories are stored as bodily sensations and emotions rather than explicit recollections. These memories influence relationships, behavior, and life without the individual being consciously and verbally aware of this impact.

On another level, beyond the right-hemisphere-to-right-hemisphere connection between therapist and client, psychotherapeutic practice aims to integrate the functioning of the right and left hemispheres within individuals, enabling people to develop coherent narratives about their experiences. At this point, Schore's research aligns with Cozolino's (2014) model of hemispheric functioning, where the right hemisphere specializes in processing emotions, bodily awareness, creative expression, and holistic perception of experiences, while the left hemisphere is more linear, logical, language-dominated, and oriented toward the external world through verbal communication. The human mind develops within a complex web of relationships long before acquiring material form, in the womb, the placenta, and birth. The human brain has evolved as a biological organ to function within groups and a network of relationships, relying on shared narratives, social bonds, and collective structures in order to thrive (Cozolino, 2014).

This discussion of the relational brain helps us realize why visual methods are not merely creative add-ons but integral to catalyzing deeper psychological insight. Images act as relational triggers, engaging right-hemisphere processes that support emotion regulation, implicit memory integration, and the co-construction of meaning. Image-based practices align with how the mind organizes experience and how psychoeducational and research contexts can promote adaptive change.

Concluding Thoughts

The value of using image sets, like the Implicity collection, lies not in the images themselves, but in the relational space they can facilitate when embedded within a relational, social-constructionist practice (Gergen, 2009). Each image functions as a provocation, a *difference that makes a difference* in the words of Gregory Bateson (Harries-Jones, 2016), inviting participants to engage with patterns of meaning that often remain unspoken. When someone selects an image that resonates with them,

they are not merely choosing a picture. This interaction becomes a mirror, reflecting aspects of experience that words alone cannot capture.

In this sense, images, when embedded within a suitable psychoeducational practice, are more than a tool. They bypass the constraints of linear, left-brain storytelling and open up a pathway to the analog, continuous world of the right hemisphere, where much of our deepest knowing resides (Brailas, 2020; Schore, 2022). By starting with images, we allow authentic patterns to emerge before language imposes its rigid structure. When these individual patterns are gradually woven together in pairs, small groups, and ultimately in a meta-narrative (Brailas et al., 2017), we witness meaning arising not from isolated elements but from relationships between them, *the pattern which connects*, a meta-pattern, forming a living ecology of mind (Bateson, 1972, 1991). In qualitative interviewing, this relational meta-pattern can be achieved even within the researcher-participant dyad (Brailas, 2025), although a community-based approach can greatly amplify the appreciative synergies and the benefits (Brailas & Papachristopoulos, 2023).

In research and psychological practice, the purpose of working with images is rather not to provide specific answers but to create spaces where participants can reflect on their own patterns, and, in dialogue with others, generate new, more flourishing, ones (Vassiliou, 1968). Working with images in this way reminds us that reflection is not only a solo act but something that can be enriched when turned into a group process (Bakhtin, 1984; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994), and that the stories we tell are always stories of connection (Brailas & Sotiropoulou, 2023).

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Notes on Contributor

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